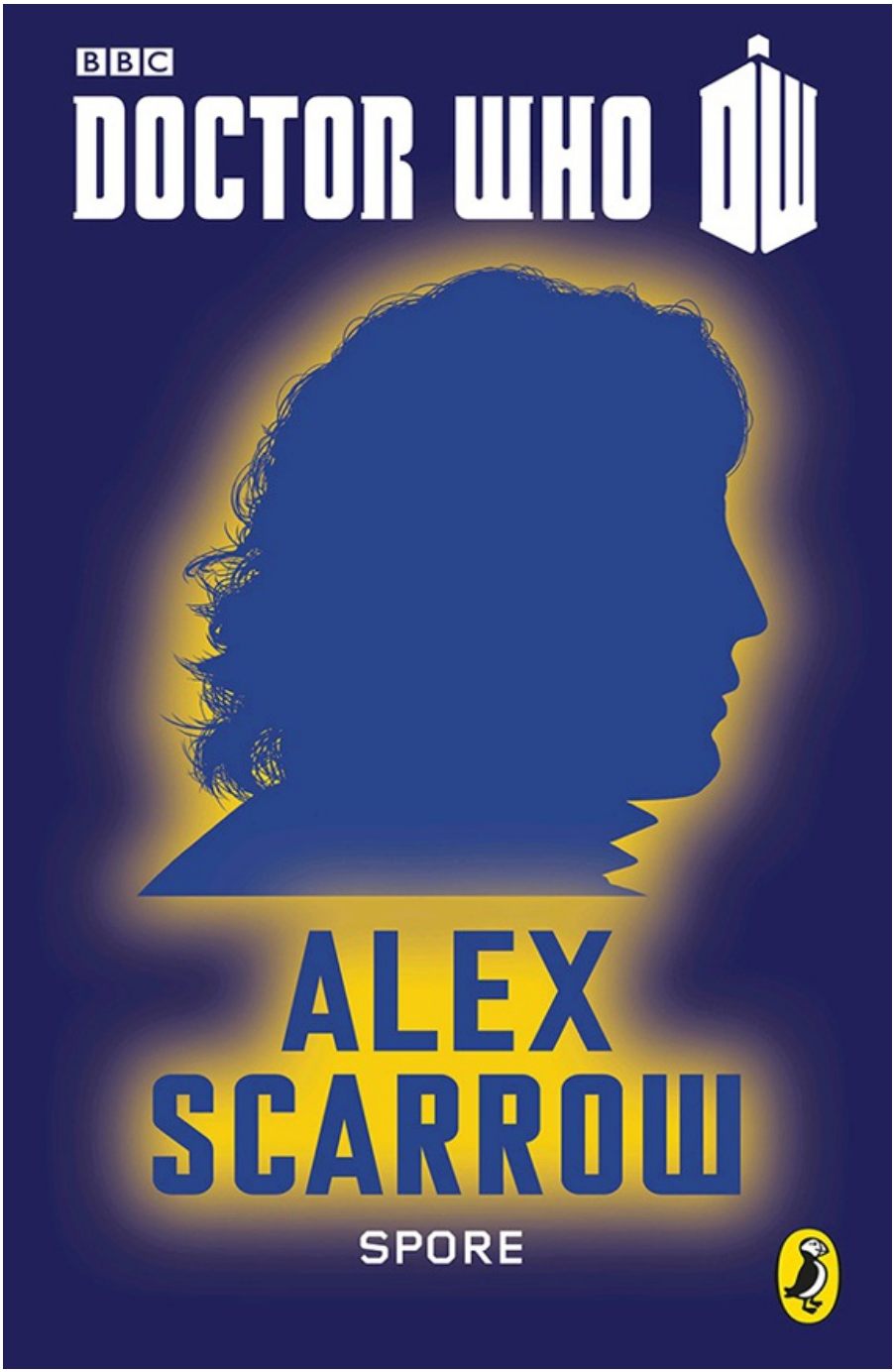
BBC

DOCTOR WHO

ALEX SCARROW

SPORE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PUFFIN

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About Alex Scarrow

Alex Scarrow used to be a graphic artist, then he decided to be a computer-games designer. Finally, he grew up and became an author. He has written a number of successful thrillers and several

screenplays, but it's YA fiction that has allowed him to really have fun with the ideas and concepts he was playing around with when designing games.

He lives in Norwich with his son, Jacob, his wife, Frances, and his Jack Russell, Max.

Find out more about Alex at www.alexscarrow.co.uk and www.time-riders.co.uk

Books By Alex Scarrow

The TimeRiders series

TimeRiders

TimeRiders: Day of the Predator

TimeRiders: The Doomsday Code

TimeRiders: The Eternal War

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1

The Doctor opened the TARDIS door and stepped out into the warm desert night. A gentle breeze

stirred the dusty ground at his feet. The only sound was the *cheep-cheep-cheep* of nearby cicadas.

That and the distant crackle of walkie-talkies, and the rumble and stutter of diesel engines idling.

'This looks familiar,' he muttered softly. The Nevada Desert, United States of America. He'd

visited here before, not so far away and not so very long ago. 1947, wasn't it? Place called *Roswell* if memory served him. He grinned in the dark.

Now that was fun.

He wondered if he ought to have another go at fixing the TARDIS's chameleon circuit some time.

Sitting out in the middle of the desert, it was going to look somewhat incongruous. Mind you, it was night and he'd put down several hundred metres from the highway. Probably no one was going to spot it out here. In the dark it would look like the stunted hump of yet another Joshua tree.

The Doctor closed and locked the door behind him and then strode out across the dry packed earth towards the army trucks parked half a kilometre away, gathered on the gravel shoulder of the dust-and-grit highway.

Closer now, he could hear the unsteady voices of frightened men, muffled by the thick rubber seals of oxygen masks. The night was dense with the crackles and beeps, and the garbled voices and

sentence fragments of to-and-fro radio traffic. Floodlights picked out a weatherworn roadside

billboard and, nearby, an abandoned gas station, the windows boarded up, the forecourt tufted with weeds. A sign beside the entrance read: *Tired? Why Not Take a Break in Fort Casey? The*

Friendliest Welcome Outside of Home!

The Doctor nodded. Fort Casey. This was where the probe he'd been tracking must have touched

down.

He had almost reached the cluster of army vehicles before someone actually spotted him emerging from the dark.

‘Hey!’ A muffled voice barked out at him. ‘YOU THERE! STOP!’

The dazzling beam of a torch settled on his face. The Doctor squinted and shaded his eyes.

‘Stop right there!’ The muffled voice sounded young. Very young. And very frightened. ‘Raise your hands!’

‘Tsk, tsk,’ chided the Doctor. ‘Raise your hands … *please*!’

‘Shut up and show me your hands!’

The Doctor raised them. ‘Charming.’

The soldier spoke into his radio. ‘Major Platt? Got a civilian here … Just came out of the dark, sir

… Infected? Don’t think so, sir.’

The Doctor could discern the outline of the young soldier against the glare of his torch: cloaked in a biohazard suit, an oxygen cylinder on his back, an assault rifle wavering uncertainly in his gloved hands. Another man joined him a moment later.

‘You!’ A deeper, more commanding voice this time. ‘Where’ve you come from?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’m not from round here.’

‘Have you come from the town, sir?’

‘Fort Casey, I presume?’

‘Yes. Have you been in direct contact with *anyone* from Fort Casey?’

‘No. I’ve only just *come down*.’

A pause. ‘From Atlanta? You one of the team from the CDC?’

The Doctor found himself nodding. The major did seem to want that to be the case rather badly so he decided to give the man what he wanted to hear. ‘Actually, yes … yes, I am.’

‘About time! We’d better get you suited up and briefed.’

‘Suited up?’ The Doctor clucked his tongue. ‘Really? Is that entirely necessary?’

Major Platt didn’t seem to be in the mood for flippancy. ‘Follow me to the command tent, I’ll give you the sit-rep.’

‘The last logged communication from the town was seventeen hours ago: a 911 call for an ambulance.

The caller only managed to say …’ The major flipped through a pad of paper on his desk. He was all buzz-cut silver hair and lean, tanned face like chiselled sandstone. Marines all the way. *Booyah*. He read what was scribbled down on the page in front of him. ‘ *They’re all dead … everyone’s dead, flesh turned to liquid. It moves … There are things! Moving things! They’re alive …*’ Major Platt looked up at the Doctor. ‘The caller became incoherent after that and disconnected shortly after.’

The Doctor drummed his fingers thoughtfully against the top of the aluminium folding-table

between them. ‘Hmm … That really doesn’t sound very good.’

The command tent was an airtight bubble of thick plastic, lit from within by several halogen stand lamps. The major had removed his mask and biohazard suit and now stared at the Doctor curiously.

His Edwardian morning jacket, waistcoat and cravat seemed particularly to be drawing the major’s gaze.

‘I was at the opera,’ the Doctor explained, ‘when my phone went off.’

The major waved that aside. ‘It appears the pathogen *isn’t* airborne, but we can’t be a hundred per cent sure of that. We have all entry/exit routes from the town locked down. It appears this thing, whatever it is, infects and kills *very* quickly.’

‘Which is probably a rather good thing.’

Platt’s grey brow furrowed.

‘Quick to kill, Major, means we don’t have to worry about an infected carrier straying too far away from the town.’ The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. ‘You said you sent some of your troops in?’

He nodded. ‘Four hours ago. We’ve not heard from them in over

three.'

'What was the last thing you did hear?'

The major shook his head. 'Garbled transmission. Made no sense to me.'

'Do tell.'

'Something about *webs everywhere. Webs all over the town.*' The major squinted his grey eyes.

'Webs? Everyone turned to liquid! You got any idea what on earth we're dealing with?'

The Doctor had a pretty good idea. But it was just that: an idea. A suspicion. He needed to know for sure. 'You're right. It's not an airborne infection, Major. At least, not yet.'

'You telling me you know what this is?'

The Doctor nodded slowly. 'I've come across it before, yes.'

'You got a name for it?'

'A nightmare.' The Doctor thumbed his chin thoughtfully. 'If it's the pathogen I think it is, it will spread quickly. There are no species barriers. It can be carried and transmitted by any creature –

anything organic, in fact.'

'That's impossible! No pathogen can do that!'

'Within seventy hours of touchdown, this thing will become uncontainable. Within a month …' The Doctor shook his head slowly. No words needed there.

The major's eyes narrowed. 'You sure you're from the Atlanta Centers of Disease Control?

Because you sure ain't like the usual pencil-neck swab-heads down there.'

'Ahh … you have me, Major,' the Doctor said with a smile. 'I lied.'

Major Platt bristled. 'Then you'd better tell me right now who sent you.'

‘I’m sure you’ve heard of the organisation, Major. Its name gets whispered every now and then in dark government corners.’

‘Who are you with?’

‘UNIT.’

The major’s face paled. ‘UNIT?’

The Unified Intelligence Taskforce; it operated off the radar and off the balance sheet for a number of the world’s governments. The Doctor had worked with UNIT before. While the average man in the street might not have heard of it, Major Platt most certainly would have, unless he had kept his head stuck firmly in the sand for all of his military career.

‘Good. It seems you *are* acquainted with it.’ The Doctor pushed himself back from the table.

‘That’s excellent. It will save us wasting valuable time, me explaining the situation to you.’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t need much … just that you need to let me go in.’

‘Impossible! Class five containment protocol – nobody else goes in, nobody comes out!’

‘ *UNIT* has the final say here, I believe. Not the army. And since I’m their man-on-the-spot … I think that makes me the one in charge here.’

Major Platt’s eyes narrowed. ‘I received no notification that my authority –’

‘Major, every second we spend here, sitting in your lovely shiny tent, is a second we simply can’t afford to waste. This pathogen will become airborne very soon.’ The Doctor smiled sadly. ‘Then all your roadblocks, all your men in their amusing rubber suits, will simply be … an irrelevance.’

2

The Doctor made his way through the barrier laid out across the single-track road leading into the town. Floodlights cast his shadow long and thin down the empty, pitted tarmac towards the dark outline of the blink-and-you’d-miss-it town in the distance.

He began to walk forward – hampered, clumsy and hot inside the heavy suit. The earpiece in his hood crackled with Major Platt's voice.

'UNIT have just confirmed your identity … *Doctor*.'

'Good.'

'"The Doctor". That's, uh … that's all they called you. Do you have a name, sir?'

The Doctor smiled at that. He'd had a name once, long ago. Nine hundred years ago. So many

memories in his head, many of them the memories of his previous incarnations, almost like someone else's – memories so faded and indistinct they were barely the whispers of ghosts.

'Just "the Doctor". That's all you need to call me.'

'The Doctor, huh?' The earpiece hissed, the channel still open. 'Fine.' Major Platt didn't sound entirely convinced. 'Well, you keep the comms channel open, OK, Doctor?'

The Doctor had no intention of doing that. 'Yes, of course.'

Ten minutes later, the Doctor reached the outer buildings of the town: tired and abandoned clapboard houses, all sun-bleached wood and flaking paint. Fort Casey clearly had been a town dying a slow death long before tonight.

Beyond the reach of the floodlights and out of sight of the major's men, the Doctor decided here was as good a place as any. He undid the hood and pulled it off, savouring the cool night air on his face. He unzipped and shrugged his way out of the rest of the biohazard suit, and kicked it off his feet.

Ridiculous outfit. It would be about as much use to him as a wet paper bag anyway.

He sniffed the air and instantly detected the sweet smell of decaying flesh. To some degree that confirmed what he already strongly suspected. This infection – this *scourge*, if it was indeed the same pathogen that had once wiped out countless Gallifreyans, was well and truly into its primary stage: absorbing and breaking down the organic matter it had already assimilated. Turning it into a usable, fluid organic matrix.

He proceeded up the small town's main street. The street lights were still on, fizzing in the night, casting a sickly amber glow down on the dusty and potholed tarmac. To his right was a grocer's store, a pink neon Budweiser beer sign blinking above the glass door .

The Doctor shone his torch at the store. At the front, empty wooden pallets advertised watermelons at three dollars each. He wandered over, aiming his torch at one of the empty pallets. A dark puddle of thick viscous liquid covered the slats of wood. The liquid had spilled over the side to the ground.

With the beam of his torch, he followed a snaking trail of the goo – thin and insubstantial as a length of forgotten twine. It looked like a black artery as it weaved, like a hairline crack, along the ground to the building next door. There it widened as other arteries of the black liquid joined it, thickening it into a dense rope.

The ground floor of the two-storey building was a diner. Above were vacant apartments that

seemed to be desperately seeking tenants. The ink-black liquid ran up the side wall, fanning out like webbing as it did so – tendrils of black feeling their way across the breeze blocks and cracked whitewash.

The Doctor approached slowly.

At the bottom of the wall, slumped against it, he saw the remains of what used to be a person. The Doctor squatted down in front of the body and inspected it. A pair of dockers' boots, faded jeans and a checked shirt. Inside the clothes, an untidy jumble of bones held together by the last scraps of flesh.

The skull was still topped with a few tufts of white hair. But no scalp. That was long gone, with every other scrap of soft organic matter. Black slime ran out of the cuffs of the shirt across the ground to unite with the other streams of organic soup.

Completely liquefied. The watermelons in front of the grocer's store and this man, both equally useful, equally digestible raw material for the pathogen to absorb. Precisely what the Doctor was expecting to find, but had been hoping he wouldn't.

The first stage looked well and truly established: infection, deconstruction and consolidation. It had evidently touched down in or near the town – one tiny pinhead-sized spore dispersed by the probe, possibly in the guise of a rock or meteor fragment, picked up on the

heel of a boot perhaps, or the rim of a truck tyre. That's all it would have taken.

The rest would be depressingly inevitable. And horrifyingly fast.

He panned his torch around and picked out more bodies in the main street. Across the road a car had mounted the kerb and tangled with some rubbish bins, the skeletal remains of the driver slumped half in, half out of the open door. Further up the street, a bundle of women's clothing lay on the pavement and, beside it, a baby stroller over on its side.

'They never stood a chance,' the Doctor said with a sigh.

'Hello?' A voice from within the diner. 'Is someone *out there*?'

A survivor? The Doctor shook his head. Impossible. There was no immunity to this thing. No *human* immunity anyway. He walked to the front of the diner and pulled one of the glass swing doors wide open. 'Is there anyone alive in here?'

'STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE!' A muffled voice. A female voice. The Doctor froze in the

doorway, then raised his hands to show he was unarmed.

He saw a slight figure in a biohazard suit slowly emerge from behind the diner's serving counter, the face obscured by an oxygen mask. 'How … how are you alive?'

The Doctor smiled and took a step forward. 'As my mother used to say, I'm rather special.'

The woman levelled the handgun she was holding at him. 'You'd better stay right there! Right

where you are!'

He looked at the name patch on her chest. 'Captain Chan, is it?'

'Captain Evelyn Chan.'

'I presume you must be one of Major Platt's investigation team?'

The woman dipped the gun slightly.

'You know, the major's rather worried that you haven't been in touch

recently.'

'My comm system's broken. I tossed it.'

The Doctor looked at her equipment belt. He noted a twisted attachment buckle and a small tear in her suit there.

She followed his gaze. 'Some of that gunk got on to my communication pack. I could see it

spreading! I had to … had to tear it off. Get rid of it fast,' she said quickly. 'But I'm not infected, OK?

It didn't get inside my suit. It didn't touch my skin –'

'I know,' interrupted the Doctor, offering her a reassuring smile. 'I know. If it had made contact with you, you would be a puddle by now.' He looked around the diner. 'What about the others in your team?'

A moment's hesitation before she eventually replied. 'I'm the only one left.' Her voice hitched.

'The others, they … they …'

'What happened to them?'

'Attacked.'

' *Attacked?* '

The woman's mask nodded slowly. 'Strange things … crawling things dropped down on us,

attacked us …'

The Doctor cursed under his breath. That meant the secondary stage was already under way. This thing was now building defensive constructs.

He took another cautious step forward and Chan quickly raised her gun and aimed it at him. 'Stay there!'

'It's all right!' he said quickly. 'I'm also not infected. In fact, I assure you, I'm quite immune.'

She shook her head. ' *Nothing's* immune!'

The Doctor stepped sideways and sat down in a booth beside the window. ‘I’ll just sit here,

Evelyn. If that’s all right with you?’

She came out from behind the counter. He could see her glancing in all directions: at the floor, under the tables and seats. She advanced slowly towards him. ‘Everything. Human, animal, plant.

This thing has infected *everything* in this town.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Yes, that’s precisely what it does.’

She took several more steps towards him, her gun still levelled at his chest. She slumped down on a chair a couple of tables from him. ‘Nothing can do this! No pathogen can work across species boundaries like that! Jump from fauna to flora –’

‘No *terrestrial* pathogen,’ said the Doctor.

‘No terrestrial …?’ He saw Chan’s eyes narrow through the glass visor of her mask. ‘You’re

saying … what? This has come from –’

‘Come from space, yes.’ The Doctor casually fiddled with the salt cellar on the table in front of him. ‘It’s a von Neumann seeding probe.’

‘What?’

‘Von Neumann. Named after one of your scientists, John von Neumann, who theorised about the

development of such a creation – a genetically engineered pathogen designed to survive deep space, to drift until it finds a planet with a habitable environment. Then it revives from a dormant state and goes to work.’

‘Goes to work?’

‘It transmits like a virus at first. Starting from just a cluster of particles, infecting, converting cells by reprogramming their DNA. Whatever it comes into contact with, it infects. It reproduces millions of copies of itself from the raw material of the infected organism, then these infected cells work together at breaking down the structure of the victim.’

Chan nodded. ‘Yes … yes, that’s what we saw.’ She looked out of the window at the deserted

street outside. ‘Everything organic,’ she said, nodding. That’s exactly what she’d witnessed.

‘Everything … seems to be necrotic, decaying to that black gunk.’

‘The pathogen’s primary stage is that process – acquiring organic mass. As much as it can and as quickly as it can. The liquid has a rudimentary intelligence, if you can call it that. It will attempt to converge on itself. To regroup, if you will. The more of the assimilated mass that is connected together, the more sophisticated its internal structure can become.’

‘Internal structure?’

‘That “black gunk” is a *transmorphic* fluid. It can restructure itself into anything it has acquired a genetic blueprint from, or even combine blueprints. The more of it that is connected together, the more sophisticated the constructs it can make.’

Captain Chan turned to look at him. ‘How do you know so much about it?’ The Doctor saw her

eyes suddenly widen. ‘My God! This is *not* an isolated outbreak? Has this happened elsewhere?’

‘There have been millions of outbreaks, Evelyn. On many worlds, over billions of years.’

Her eyes narrowed again. She stared at him, silent for a few moments. ‘Just who on earth are you?’

The Doctor considered her question. He supposed he could take the time to explain who he was.

He could explain that his people, the Time Lords, had once been attacked by this very pathogen. As a young man, he’d read about the infection on Gallifrey, so long ago now. The Spore had arrived more than a thousand years before he was born. Several hundred thousand Time Lords had died before

they’d managed to deal with it, engineering an inherited immunity into their genes so that they would never be vulnerable again. He could explain all of those things, but time wasn’t exactly on their side.

He decided to keep the explanation short and sweet. A quick answer would do for now.

‘You’ll find there are a few conspiracy websites that mention me. I suspect one or two

governments have rather extensive files on me too. I’m known as “The Doctor”. Suffice it to say, I’m not from round here.’ He pursed his lips. ‘But I have developed a habit of dropping by from time to time.’ The Doctor sat back and straightened his morning coat. ‘But introductions can wait, Captain Chan. We don’t have a great deal of time. You said you were attacked?’

She nodded. ‘Crab-like things. Hundreds of them. Cut through our suits and got inside.’ She closed her eyes for a moment. ‘I barely got away.’

‘You were the only survivor?’

Chan shook her head and glanced quickly at the swing doors behind the counter. ‘There was also Rutherford.’

The Doctor noted a dark and bloody handprint on one of the doors.

‘It was one of those black goo threads. Rutherford was trying to gather a sample. We thought it was just liquid.’ She shook her head, trying to make sense of what she’d witnessed. ‘But it kind of *reared up* and lashed out at him. Punctured right through his mask.’ She looked away. ‘I tried to save him.

But he was dying within minutes, *seconds* even. I dragged him in there …’

‘He’s in there now? Through those doors?’

‘In the kitchen.’

The Doctor looked at the swing doors. Chan had grabbed a tea-towel and tied a knot binding

together both the door handles. That wasn’t going to stop anything, but it meant she understood.

Best not to open them. Best not to step inside.

‘Keep that door firmly closed, Evelyn. Whatever you do, do *not* go in.’

She nodded quickly. ‘I looked in about twenty minutes ago.’ She let slip a choked sob. ‘It was horrible. Rutherford was …’

‘This thing goes through stages. Stage One is biomass assimilation and consolidation. That’s the stage that was happening before you arrived. In Stage Two it starts generating simple constructs –

creatures, for sake of a better word. That’s a defensive measure. That’s what you’ve witnessed.

Stage Three is … well …’ The Doctor stroked his chin. ‘That’s the most fascinating stage with this thing, actually. Really quite remarkable.’

‘What?’

The most curious thing in the Spore’s infection life cycle was the third stage. What the Time Lords had dubbed the ‘enquiry stage’. The mystery creators of the pathogen – perhaps long gone now – had built in a safety mechanism to ensure that the Spore never erased another advanced civilisation.

Perhaps they feared a drifting spore might return one day and destroy their own homeworld? Perhaps they believed it unethical that their own creation might wipe out another intelligent species?

‘What’s Stage Three?’ prompted Chan.

The Doctor looked back at her. ‘At the centre of the infection, ground zero, the Spore will construct an intelligence matrix. A brain, if you will.’

‘A *brain*?’

‘Well, an intelligence at any rate.’

‘Why?’

‘It has a question it needs to ask.’ The Doctor shrugged. ‘Answer it correctly and the brain instructs every cell in its biomass to switch from reproducing cells to manufacturing a lethal toxin that eventually will destroy itself.’

‘Why would it do that?’

‘Answering the question correctly indicates intelligence. This pathogen is “programmed” to avoid wiping out intelligent life.’

‘And if we don’t give the right answer? Then what?’

The Doctor winced. ‘Then the Spore will continue to develop ever more sophisticated constructs –

creatures that can run, swim, fly. Creatures that will carry the infection in all directions. It will become uncontainable.’ He pressed his lips together. ‘A week from now, every organic thing on this planet will have been converted to biomass.’

‘No way!’ breathed Chan.

‘The theory is,’ the Doctor continued, ‘it was created by an alien civilisation to “overwrite” the native ecosystems of other planets with their own. To render those planets hospitable for them centuries – even millennia – before they might one day need them as homes. A form of long-distance biological terraforming. That, or it’s some sort of ghastly weapon.’

‘But you … you’re saying we can *communicate* with this thing?’ Chan shook her head. ‘Actually *talk* to it?’

‘“Talk” is somewhat generous. It’s not like we’ll be exchanging penpal details.’

‘But it will ask us this question?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘Yes, and there’s the rub. Humans won’t understand it, let alone be able to answer it. Not for another fifty or so years.’

‘Another fifty years?’ Chan’s eyes widened. ‘Are you saying … you’re from –’

‘The future?’ The Doctor nodded. ‘And the past. You could say I get around quite a bit.’ He looked out of the window again. ‘And I’ve already wasted enough time. I need to locate the intelligence matrix as soon as possible. It won’t wait around forever to decide whether you’re a species worth preserving or not. I need to catch it before it starts creating airborne constructs.’

Chan looked at him. ‘You’re actually going back out there?’

‘Of course. And I suggest you stay right here. Keep the door closed until I come back.’

Chan shook her head. ‘I’m not staying here. Not alone. No way.’

The Doctor looked at the doors behind the counter. Nowhere was safe, to be fair, inside or out. Not now the Spore was building constructs. Perhaps she’d be better off staying close by his side.

‘All right then,’ he said, shrugging. ‘You can come along if you want.’

3

The Doctor stepped out into the street, Chan behind him. He scanned back and forth with his torch.

Threads of black goo criss-crossed the tarmac, fanning out from the humps of mostly dissolved bodies and stripped carcasses; threads seeking each other – converging.

‘The individual colonies of biomass will attempt to join each other – to pool their mass together.

The more of this stuff comes together in one place, the more *ambitious* the constructs it will try to produce.’

‘It can make *bigger* things than crabs?’

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. ‘Much bigger.’

They made their way slowly down the still, silent street. A gentle breeze stirred the night, sending a rooftop weathervane spinning with a *clack- clack- clack*. A wind chime on the porch of a hardware store gently played solemn, random notes. The wheel of an overturned child’s tricycle spun slowly, the bearings clicking like the aluminium balls of a Newton’s cradle.

‘We’re looking for a pattern – a significant convergence of fluid, threads feeling their way towards a central hub. It will look like a starburst pattern, like dozens of rivers all flowing into a lake.’

‘A central hub?’ Chan looked at him. ‘The brain?’

He nodded. ‘And that, Evelyn, it will most definitely want to defend.’

They made their way past a medical centre, a tangle of cars parked erratically outside, log-

jamming the street. It looked like many of the townspeople had been attempting to get to this point, some of them dying before they could

even reach the door.

‘My God,’ Chan whispered. ‘It must have been awful. It must have –’

She stopped dead, raised her gun and dropped to an army-trained firing stance.

‘What?’

‘Movement. Over there. Between the cars.’

The Doctor swung the beam of his torch in the direction she was aiming. The cone of light reflected off the dusty windscreen of a farmer’s truck and the wax-polished hood of a Chevrolet.

‘There’s something there,’ hissed Chan.

The smooth, rounded surface of something dark shifted under the harsh glare of the light.

‘Ah yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘I see it.’

Movement again. A black shape, the size of a large dog, with jointed, spider-like legs and covered by a hard, spiny carapace, leaped on to the bonnet of the Chevrolet. The car rocked gently under its weight.

Chan squeezed the trigger and her handgun kicked. The shot cracked through the creature’s organic armour and strings of dark matter spurted out. The creature – dark and glistening – collapsed and spasmed.

‘Rather good shot, that. Well done.’

Chan breathed heavily, fogging her mask. ‘A lucky shot. I-I haven’t used a f-firearm since basic training.’

Another creature emerged from the cluster of cars. She swung her arm and fired. A windshield

imploded beside it. She fired again and they heard the dull eggshell crack of impact and the sound of goo spattering against the side panel of a nearby Honda. The creature disappeared from view.

But four more scuttled into view to replace it.

Chan fired at the first one and missed.

She fired several more times as yet more of them appeared. Then the gun was clicking uselessly as her fingers impulsively worked the trigger.

'Oh no … I'm out.'

There were a dozen of them now, creatures the size of Rottweilers. Dark, glistening, hunched low on insectoid legs, headless, eyeless – a beetle-like menace. They advanced slowly.

Chan whimpered as they closed the gap. The Doctor grasped her arm and pulled her back, then

stepped in front of her.

'What are you doing?'

'Just a thought,' he replied quickly. He approached the horde slowly and spread his arms. The

beetle-like creatures hissed and clicked in response … and stopped where they were. 'Yes. What I expected. It's begun the query stage. It's waiting for contact with an intelligent life-form. It's ready to talk. Ready to ask its question.' He looked back over his shoulder at Chan. 'But it won't wait around for that forever. You understand? We have to find it quickly.'

Chan nodded nervously.

The Doctor swung the beam of his torch. 'Those constructs are gathered here to guard the brain. It must be very close. Look, Evelyn. Look around. Can you see anything?'

She shone her own torch around, following the criss-crossing, snaking dark threads on the road as they converged into thicker tributaries. One particular strand seemed to have acquired the role of main artery, attracting others towards it, like moths to a candle flame. It wound up the street, broadening into a thick leathery trunk, like a fireman's hose, which pulsated and quivered as a steady flow of organic soup travelled up inside it.

Chan's torch beam tracked it as it slunk its way towards the rear of a delivery truck parked fifty metres up the road, across a small town square where several dozen stalls had been erected. It looked as if Fort Casey had been preparing for market day when the Spore decided to come to town.

The leathery artery curled up to the rear of the truck, then seemed to spread out across its open loading ramp and disappear inside the vehicle.

'That looks promising,' said the Doctor under his breath. He edged away from the creatures and rejoined Chan. 'I suggest we make our way – in an exceedingly unthreatening manner – towards that vehicle.'

She nodded. They backed up from the creatures and slowly made their way up the street towards

the vehicle.

Nearer now, the Doctor could read the logo emblazoned on the side of the truck's container:

Bernard and Sons – Poultry Supplies. Carefully, he stepped over thickening tributaries of the viscous matter, all heading towards the rear of the truck.

All roads lead to Rome.

Finally, they stood at the base of the ramp and Chan shone her torch up. Inside, she could see dozens of stacked wire-mesh cages. Feathers littered the floor of the container like snowfall. Bones and beaks and scaled claws in every cage, the other remains of what had once been hundreds of

battery chickens now rendered to black liquid dangling from the cages in sheets of pulsating goo that lined the interior walls of the container. Thick tendrils swayed from the sheets like sightless serpents sniffing the air.

At the far end of the truck, the liquid had converged into a lava-lamplike mass that glistened wetly in the light of their torches – shifting, bulging, extruding bubbles and occasionally larger, firmer shapes that momentarily resembled the torso and legs of a human … the head and neck of a horse …

the muzzle of a dog.

'What's it doing?' asked Chan, swallowing hard.

'I imagine it's testing out the constructs it can make from the DNA it has so far acquired.'

Smaller, less ambitious creatures scuttled around the floor, creatures that looked like the

impossible offspring of crustaceans and rodents. The beam of the Doctor's torch picked out dozens of them clambering over each other, a seething mess of hard-shelled legs and claws, sharp spines, carapaces and grey fur. He suspected if the creatures turned and swarmed them, their sharp claws would pick them clean of flesh within minutes. He needed to communicate quickly, before the Spore decided it felt threatened and instructed its army of defenders to surge forward.

'Hello?' he said softly.

The liquid mass at the back of the container pulsated in response to his voice. It quivered for a moment, then one tendril quickly began to thicken and lengthen, drawing substance from the central mass as it snaked its way towards the Doctor.

'Doctor,' whispered Chan. 'Watch out!'

'It's all right. This is it saying "hello".' He looked at her. 'I hope.'

How do I communicate with this thing?

The Doctor dredged long-forgotten details of the Gallifreyan experience of this entity from the dark recesses of his mind. One thing stood out: a single scientist had allowed himself to be infected, had allowed the cells of this thing into his body, and at some microbiological level a connection had been made.

Taking a deep breath, the Doctor stepped slowly up the loading ramp and into the truck. 'I'm here to talk to you.'

The black tendril glided towards him, rose up and hovered in front of his face, swaying from side to side like a cobra preparing to strike.

'That's right, I'm not a threat,' the Doctor cooed softly. 'I'm here to talk.'

Its movement slowed. The tip of the tendril began to grow, producing a bulbous end. From that, a tiny whisker-like tentacle began to emerge. It grew towards the Doctor's face, thin and flexible as a wire, feeling its way across the air between them. The Doctor suppressed an urge to recoil. He knew the Spore wasn't going to be able to infect and assimilate him – his inherited immunity prevented that

– but that didn't make the idea of allowing it inside him any more pleasant.

The fine tentacle lightly touched the tip of his nose. Testing it. The gentlest, tickling caress. Then it began to explore his cheeks, his brow, curling round the side of his face and exploring the curves of his ear.

The Doctor fought the urge to pull back. The Spore 'knew' how the enquiry stage worked. He was going to have to let it steer negotiations.

The tentacle returned to his face, resting against the side of his nose. He felt a tiny sting as small barbs attached it more firmly to his skin. Then he felt something tickling the rim of his left nostril. He wanted to reach up and scratch his nose. It tickled in an entirely revolting, invasive and unpleasant way.

He felt the tentacle curl inside, a cool liquid sensation sliding slowly up inside his nasal passage.

Then a strange tingling spread between his eyes, moving further backwards, past his visual cortex, into his temporal lobes, and on, deeper into his cranium …

It's attempting to locate a connection to my brain.

The unpleasantly cool sensation inside his nose began to fade. The tentacle was adjusting its

temperature to match that of his own body. To make the connection more comfortable for him,

perhaps? A reassuring thought if that was the case.

Then …

Then …

4

'What's happening?' called Chan as the Doctor's body jerked suddenly. 'Doctor, are you OK?'

Chan looked over her shoulder. The beetle-like creatures were beginning to gather threateningly close. More of them were emerging from the nearby market stalls, where the deflated rinds of melons and husks of corn cobs merged into dark soup, and from a florist's where

hanging baskets drooled tendrils of oil-black slime. The creatures shuffled slowly towards her.

‘Doctor! They’re getting close out here,’ she called.

No answer.

‘I mean reeeeally close!’

No answer. She shone her torch back into the truck. All she could see was the back of the Doctor’s head. He was standing perfectly still now, almost as if he were in some kind of trance.

‘This is not looking good! Doctor?’

She aimed her torch back out at the creatures just as one of them suddenly lashed out towards her with a spiked tentacle. The tentacle wrapped tightly round her leg. She felt its firm vice-like grip contracting, beginning to crush her ankle. Then there was a painful pricking as sharp barbs cut through her biohazard suit and pierced her skin.

‘Oh no! Doctor! It’s cut through my suit!’ she whimpered. ‘It’s broken my skin! I’m infected!’

The Doctor remained perfectly still. His mind was far, far away. His vision was filled with an image of another world. He glimpsed a purple sky, twin suns with a blue hue to them. Another image: a different world, with heavy tumbling clouds and many dozens of twisted pillars of a resin-like substance reaching hundreds of metres towards the troubled sky. It resembled a city of termite mounds. Then another world of green skies, methane gas and floating balloon-like creatures.

Trace memories of worlds this strain of the Spore must have visited before, worlds it had visited, absorbed and moved on from. Worlds visited how many countless millions of years ago?

Then … something resonated in his head. It was not something he could truly describe as a voice.

And yet somehow it was. Deep inside his brain he heard a sexless, ageless voice. A whisper of

consciousness penetrating his mind. A thought that was distinctly not his.

You seek communication?

I do.

You represent entity?

I do.

Represent of this world?

Yes.

Fleeting images filled the Doctor's head: a slideshow of species from Earth. Species that the Spore had already touched and absorbed and decoded. Thousands of microbes that it must have first

encountered in the dry dirt of the Nevada Desert. Hundreds of insects: an ant, a beetle, a many-hued dragonfly. Now more complex forms: a tan-coloured rodent, a rattlesnake, some small species of desert fox. Now larger: a cow, a dog and finally … a human. A record of the Spore's journey up the food chain.

Then the procession of images ceased. The Doctor had his vision returned to him.

Not represent entity of this world. From another world.

Yes. I have travelled, as it seems you have.

You have resistant structural code.

The Spore was referring to his inherited immunity. A few lines in his genome that prevented this pathogen from being able to absorb him and render him an amorphous organic soup.

Yes. Your kind once visited my planet. You asked the question and we answered it satisfactorily.

We were allowed to continue to exist. We developed a vaccine from the toxin you used to self-terminate.

A correct process. Demonstration of intelligence. Your kind judged acceptable.

The intelligent entities on this planet will not be able to answer your question correctly.

This makes entities' mass from this world a viable resource.

But they are an intelligent species.

Intelligence defined by answering correctly.

And they will answer you correctly. But not yet.

Irrelevant.

It is not irrelevant. It is simply bad timing.

Explain.

Your journey here was an entirely random one. On what? A rock? A piece of ice? A million

different variables conspired to land you on this planet at this time. If one thing had happened differently – if your rock had been a fraction bigger, or travelled a fraction slower, or been affected by the tiniest pull of gravity from some other mass nearby – you might have arrived here just a few decades later … at a time when these entities could answer you correctly.

Irrelevant.

They just need a few more years. That's all. They will become a remarkable species capable of –

Question must be asked of entity mass from this world.

The Doctor frowned. The Spore was too simple an intelligence to *philosophise* with. It was no more sophisticated than the majority of desktop computers currently on Earth – little better than an operating system asking for a password. Asking it to make a judgement call was going to be pointless.

It was a 'brain' designed long ago to deliver a question and listen for the answer. That was all. He was going to have to change his approach …

Evelyn Chan could feel her leg beginning to go numb, an invasive coolness rising inside her thigh, infection spreading from artery to artery. Spore cells swiftly overcame her hastily scrambled immune system, massacring white blood cells in their millions. She felt lightheaded. Dizzy. Her legs wobbled, then buckled beneath her. She collapsed to the ground, gasping as she fought for breath, the torch sliding out of her hand.

‘Doctor!’ she cried groggily. ‘Doctor … I’m dying.’

The Doctor barely heard Evelyn’s voice. It sounded as if it was coming from someone a thousand miles away. All the same, he understood what she’d said. She was infected. He had minutes to save her life, seconds even. Time to roll the dice.

You have made a mistake.

Explain mistake.

You have returned to your origin world. To those that once engineered you, millions of years ago. You are in danger of destroying your creator.

Original creator would have immunity.

But much time has passed. Natural mutations in the DNA of your creator have occurred and

compromised that immunity. They have evolved. They are no longer recognisable as the original species – your creators. But they are their descendants. And you will destroy them.

He sensed confusion in the Spore – voices like collegiate whispers, the organic equivalent of a computer struggling to run lines of code it was not designed to process.

They are descendent species of creator?

It sounded like the Spore was asking him for confirmation.

Yes! They are a descendent species! They are the ‘children’ of your creators.

Question must still be answered. Descendants of creator must demonstrate intelligence of

original creators. Descendants will know answer.

The Doctor ground his teeth. Perhaps a simple, straightforward lie would work instead. He turned and glanced back out of the truck. Evelyn Chan was lying at the bottom of the ramp; she was dying. It might already be too late to save her. A lie. A simple lie was all he had left. Perhaps this thing’s intelligence was so rudimentary that it would not question the false information he’d given a moment ago; that it would not understand a simple lie.

Earlier information was incorrect.

Explain incorrect information.

I am not from another world.

Explain.

I am a messenger entity of your creator's descendants. I am an anti-pathogen. Your opposite, designed to communicate with you in the event of your return. I am a construct of theirs, just as you are. I have lived for millions of years, waiting for the possibility of your return. And I was designed to give you the answer.

You are construct – a remote partial?

He guessed that was the term the Spore used for one of the crab-like creatures scuttling around on the floor in front of him.

Yes. A remote partial.

You answer for descendants of creator?

Yes, that is my purpose. I will answer the question on their behalf.

The Doctor could sense the Spore trying to work with the limited resources of its genetically

encoded artificial intelligence. He held his breath. So much depended on the decision it reached. Not just Evelyn's life but the life of every living thing on Earth …

Acceptable. The question – explain ratio 1:812.

Chan could feel her mind drifting. She was losing consciousness, descending into a comatose stupor.

Her sight was growing foggy, getting dim round the edges.

Is this how it feels to die? It was almost serene, almost pleasant. She was about to be cannibalised from the inside out … and it didn't seem to matter.

And then something happened. She felt a sharp stabbing in her head, like the sudden onset of a piercing migraine. Her vision began to clear, to refocus. She retched as she felt her muscles

cramping: the pain of her body's immune system fighting back. She struggled to sit up, her head throbbing, her stomach churning.

The pulsating tendril wrapped round her ankle suddenly convulsed violently. Its skin ruptured and a small jet of creamy liquid spurted out across her feet.

Revolted, she tried to kick the dying tendril off her.

The smooth skin of the artery split in a dozen other places and liquid oozed and bubbled out on to the ramp and the tarmac. The nearest of the beetle-like creatures flopped to the ground and began to shudder as if in a seizure. The others followed in quick succession, one after the other, their long spine-covered legs twitching and curling.

She heard footsteps and turned to see the Doctor stepping down from the ramp, wiping a dark

smear from beside his nose with the cuff of his jacket.

'What … what's happening?' she slurred. 'Did you manage to communicate with it?'

'I did indeed,' replied the Doctor. 'And now it's doing the polite thing and killing itself.' He smiled. 'Awfully decent thing, that pathogen. Very understanding.'

Ratio 1:812?

The Doctor smiled. Every child on Gallifrey knew the answer to a question as elementary as that.

A classroom question – basic kindergarten eleven-dimension superstring theory.

Well, now, he'd answered the Spore, *the answer is …*

'I don't even understand the question,' said Chan. 'Let alone know how we would have come up with an answer.'

She winced as they hobbled up the road, the Doctor supporting her with an arm round her waist.

The bones in her ankle were fractured.

'Well, you're not a quantum physicist, are you?'

The Doctor turned to look past her shoulder at the rising sun. He narrowed his eyes against the glare. It had emerged in the last few minutes from the flat desert: a ball of molten orange separating itself from the shimmering horizon. Long shadows of stunted Joshua trees made dark stripes across the dusty ground.

Half a kilometre down the road, the roadblock waited. They could make out the trucks and the

soldiers lined up in their white biohazard suits.

'However, a quantum physicist in about fifty years' time *will* understand, Evelyn Chan. And that's really all that matters.'

He raised the sample container in his hand. 'By the way, you'll want this analysed to produce a vaccine, just in case there's another rock in near-Earth orbit carrying another pathogen. The Spore does seem to come in clusters, from our experience.'

She looked again at the sample. Half an hour ago it had been a bubbling puddle of black goo, now it looked like dried fruit or the mummified ear of some shrivelled and long-forgotten pharaoh.

The Spore was dead.

'Why don't you just tell me the answer? I know, being a mere dumb human I probably won't

understand what it means, but at least if another one of these things does arrive in the near future, we'll have the right answer to give.'

The Doctor pressed his lips together. 'But, Evelyn, this is scientific knowledge that you should *earn* rather than receive ahead of the natural time. It would be like me handing over an antimatter energy cell to Isaac Newton and telling him to have a play around with it. Maybe take it apart and see how it all ticks.' He chuckled at the thought of that. 'Rather a messy bang there, I'd imagine.'

He turned to look at her. 'All I will tell you is, in the place where I come from …' He paused and a wistful smile played across his lips for a moment. 'I should say, where I *came* from, the answer was used by some of my people to claim final proof of the existence of the old gods.'

'Really?'

‘And,’ he continued with a grin, ‘just as many said the answer finally *disproved* the notion of gods.’ He laughed. ‘Funny old universe. You never do get a clear and final answer on that particular question, do you?’

They were closer to the roadblock now. The Doctor could make out more detail. Major Platt was

warily watching their slow, hobbling approach. Every last soldier was scrambled and manning the barricade, guns held, muzzles aimed at the ground. But ready. In case. More trucks had arrived during the night and several helicopters were buzzing in the dawn sky, search beams carving bright lines down on to the desert.

Evelyn Chan had unzipped and removed her hood as soon as the Doctor had assured her the

pathogen was quite dead and harmless. Now she wiped sweat from her forehead. ‘So, did you come here in some big spaceship?’ she asked.

He frowned, pouting at the same time. ‘I suppose it’s a little bit like a spaceship. Although it doesn’t look particularly grand from the outside.’

She looked up at the gradually lightening sky. ‘And you really have been way out there? Beyond our solar system?’

He nodded. ‘Many places. Many times.’

‘You must have seen some incredible things.’

He nodded. ‘Quite a few. In the end, though, it’s mostly a handful of elements combined in an

infinite variety of interesting ways.’ He scratched his chin thoughtfully.

Chan’s eyes were still up on the heavens. Dawn was slowly painting out the stars one by one as the sky paled from a deep midnight purple to an intense morning blue. ‘I’d love to see what’s out there.’

He turned to look at her. ‘Well, your kind will one day, Evelyn.’ He nodded pensively. ‘Not long after you learn the answer to that question, actually. It will unlock your understanding of higher spatial dimensions. It will allow humanity to cross the vast distances between

star systems. It will –' He stopped himself. 'Ah, but there you go. I'm giving too much away, aren't I?'

They approached the roadblock. The Doctor casually saluted to the waiting major, then tossed the specimen jar to him over the stretched coil of barbed wire.

'Right. Here you are, Major. One Captain Evelyn Chan, battered and bruised, but not infectious.

She's quite safe. But she does need someone to take a look at her ankle.'

The Doctor eased his hold on Chan as she took the cautiously extended hand of a soldier. Then he turned and began to walk away from the barricade, back into the desert.

'And where are you going?' called Major Platt. 'We need to debrief you! We need to know exactly what happened back there.'

The Doctor offered Chan a small wave. 'I'll let you bring him up to speed.'

'Where *are* you going, Doctor?' she called.

The Doctor rolled his gaze upwards at the rapidly disappearing stars in the brightening sky. A gesture for her eyes only.

She nodded. *Understood.* 'And … and will you be back? Will we see you again?'

He grinned. 'I imagine I might look in on you sometime in the future, Captain Evelyn Chan.'

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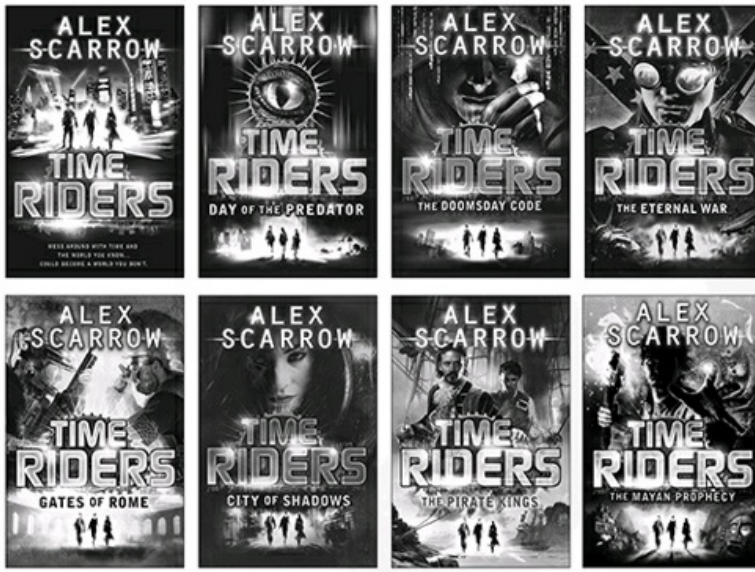

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